〔Note〕

Moving Lives at the People's History Museum, Manchester

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The following notes outline part of a three-year group research project into the ways that museums are collaborating across national borders to deal with issues of migration and identity. My own research will begin with the People's History Museum in Manchester, UK, and focus on its involvement in *Migration, Work and Identity*, a major project that brings together seven European museums. The first section of these research notes briefly describes the *Migration, Work and Identity* project. The second and third sections introduce the People's History Museum and the exhibition *Moving Lives*, the museum's first major contribution to *Migration, Work and Identity*. The final section presents some of the key questions that will inform my forthcoming research trip to Manchester in August 2002.

Keywords: labour history, migration, museums

Ⅰ. Migration, Work & Identity

For millennia, human migration has been shaping European society, altering the size and composition of populations, rearranging patterns of social, economic and cultural activity. In modern times, the processes of industrialization and urbanization gave rise to mass demographic movements, particularly from Eastern to Western Europe and from Southern Europe to Northern Europe. The 20th century witnessed enormous waves of forced migration with some 60 million people being displaced by war between 1913 and 1999.[1] In the second half of the 20th century, decolonization by European powers led to the 'repatriation' of colonial populations and new currents of labour migration made up of people from the former colonies. There has also been a vast increase in the number of political refugees seeking asylum in Europe, from 107,800 in 1980 to more than 750,000 in 1991.[2]

Migration, Work and Identity is a three-year project that presents "a history of people in Europe, told in museums." The project was launched in 2000 with substantial funding by the European Union and brings together seven museums of labour history in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.[3] At the project's 2nd major conference, held in

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Copenhagen in 2001, Rainer Ohliger pointed to the collective failure of Europeans to recognize the place of migration and migrants in the formation of European cultures.

> The image of Europe's Self is, despite historically different experiences, still determined by national paradigms and modes of interpretation. This leaves little room for the representation of border-transcending phenomena such as migration or processes resulting from migration. Migrants are written into [the] national memories ... of European nations as Others. ... They are seldom portrayed as part of the Self.[4]

Migration, Work and Identity is an attempt by historical museums to foster a European perspective on issues of migration and thus address the deficiency identified by Ohliger. Each of the museums involved with the project is conducting a programme of research, exhibitions and educational events to address issues specific to migration in its own country. For example, *The New Europeans* exhibition at the Workers' Museum in Copenhagen takes up the story of the mainly Yugoslav, Turkish and Pakistani families that migrated to Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Humans*, the Museum of Work in Norrköping is coordinating exhibitions at twenty-one locations throughout Sweden, each presenting the local experience of migration. To encourage a European perspective, a travelling exhibition will be hosted by each of the participating museums. Two major conferences have been held, in Manchester (2000) and Copenhagen (2001), and a third is scheduled for 2003 in Terrassa, Spain.[5]

The members of the project have high hopes that it will contribute to an ongoing discussion about cultural diversity and that "greater knowledge of the different migrant communities within Europe will improve understanding and tolerance."[6] On the one hand, this means making space for various migrant communities to tell their own 'life stories' — stories which to a large extent have remained untold. To this end, all the exhibitions connected with this project have involved close collaboration with the migrant communities. At the same time, *Migration, Work and Identity* seeks to challenge misconceptions that majority communities often have about themselves. The *Museum Arbeitswelt*, in Steyr, for example, comments that "the fact of being a land of immigration has not been adequately reflected in Austrians' self-image." Through its exhibition *Migration to Austria*, the museum aims "to emphatically call attention to the disparity between facts and the general perception."[7] Similarly, the *Museum der Arbeit*, in Hamburg observes how the city "likes to present itself as a cosmopolitan and tolerant place...but even now immigrants are first and foremost considered to be a 'burden'." The exhibition *Divided Worlds?*

Hamburg and Migration aims to look at "parallel cultures and cultural co-operation, thus contributing to anti-racist education not only for young people but for all age and social groups."[8]

Ⅱ. The People's History Museum

The UK partner in the *Migration, Work and Identity* project is the People's History Museum in Manchester. It bills itself as "the only national museum dedicated to the lives of ordinary people."[9] Its galleries use artifacts such as posters, photographs, tools and other everyday objects to tell the story of ordinary working people in Britain over the last two hundred years.

The museum has its origins in the 1960s, in a collection of labour history memorabilia assembled by the Trade Union, Labour and Co-operative History Society. According to Nick Mansfield, the current Director of the museum, this was a small group of left-wing activists who were "consciously collecting for the revolution."[10] They began with temporary exhibitions, then, from 1975, ran a small labour history museum in Limehouse Town Hall, London. The group shunned professional curatorial involvement and the collection was poorly looked after. This meant that many potential benefactors were reluctant to place items with the museum. The group also had difficulty raising funds and eventually these financial problems forced the museum to close in 1986. The collection went into storage where it stayed until the local authorities in Manchester made an offer to re-house it in the newly renovated Manchester Mechanics Building. This building is itself historically significant as the site of the first Trades Union Congress meeting in 1868. The collection was placed under professional curatorship and, in May 1990, it opened to the public in its new location as the National Museum of Labour History.[11]

Four years after the National Museum of Labour History opened in Manchester, the main galleries were relocated to the Pump House, another building of historical importance. Originally opened in 1909 as a hydraulic pumping station providing power for Manchester's cotton industry, the Pump House was converted for museum use and the new galleries opened there in May 1994.[12]

Following the move to Manchester, the museum steadily expanded and broadened its collections. Its credibility was enhanced considerably when in 1990 it took charge of the Labour Party archives. These are now housed in its Labour History Archive and Study Centre along with archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain and other organizations within the labour movement.[13] In 1995, with financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the museum set

up the National Banner Initiative and it now has the largest collection of Trade Union banners in the world. In 1998, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport granted the museum 'designated status' in a new scheme to promote "outstanding collections" of national importance.[14]

The museum continues to operate on two sites, with the head offices and archives in the Manchester Mechanics Institute building and the main galleries at the Pump House. In 2001 the name People's History Museum was adopted to embrace both locations. The omission of the specific reference to 'labour' in the new name[15] reflects the fact that it is now a wider-ranging collection addressing "all aspects of the social and cultural history of Great Britain."[16] Labour history remains the focus of the museum, but its scope has expanded considerably to include, for example, sections on popular music, leisure time and an important collection from the Footballers' Association.

Although the museum is unaffiliated to any political party, the bulk of its collection is overtly political. The history of ordinary British people is presented as an ongoing struggle for social and political rights. The story of how those rights have been achieved is told in language which is drawn self-consciously from the labour movement. The permanent galleries are divided into five areas with names like *Revolution, United We Stand* and *Spreading The Word*. In a section entitled *Poor Man's Guardian* visitors are invited to "visit our print shop to discover how cartoons have been used to challenge those in power."[17] Another section is based on Robert Tressell's novel *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, a book which "illustrates the benefits of socialism." In *The Co-op*, we "discover how co-operatives have benefited their members"[18], and in *Strike!* we "find out why workers went on strike, what hardships they endured and what improvements were gained."[19] The language of struggle is apparent even in areas of the museum which deal with people's leisure time. *More Than A Game* deals with football, arguably the most important aspect of British popular culture.[20] Here, visitors learn "how the Professional Footballers' Association fought to improve footballers' pay and conditions."[21]

In presenting its story of 'ordinary working people' to the public, the People's History Museum employs traditional displays of artifacts, photographs, and explanatory panels and offers regular lectures by specialists. It is also experimenting with more up-to-date, interactive techniques. In 2000, the museum received a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to help make the galleries more 'family friendly' and it subsequently introduced a programme of interactive features known as *Play Your Part*.[22] Much of this programme is clearly targeted at children and emphasizes the kinds of hands-on activities that have proved so popular at other British museums, such as *Eureka!*, the

children's science museum in Halifax or *The Exploratory* in Bristol. At the People's History Museum this typically involves children in traditional arts and crafts such as 'rag rug making', producing a Punch and Judy show, or creating a miniature theatre for a 'Victorian Family Christmas.'[23]

Play Your Part Live is an extension of the *Living History* performances first introduced by the museum in 1998. Actors in period dress dramatise the lives of real but little-known historical people. Members of the audience interact with these characters, sometimes being asked to engage in roleplay themselves. As part of a 30 minute dramatization of the life of 19th century newspaper editor 'Bronterre' O'Brien, the audience is invited to "help Bronterre uncover how ordinary workers in Victorian Britain are treated and write your very own newspaper headlines."[24] Other *Living History* performances call on members of the audience to arbitrate in re-enactments of historical conflict. Through the dramatization of the life of Victorian trade union official Robert Murray, visitors "discover how Bolton became a battleground between workers and management in 1887," and are then asked to "Play Your Part and help decide the outcome."[25] Another interactive innovation by the museum is a voting card system that allows visitors to express their views on issues as they move around the museum.[26]

This section has outlined the work of People's History Museum as described at its website and in assorted promotional materials. To summarise, in addition to maintaining extensive labour history archives, the museum presents the history of the struggle by ordinary people to achieve democratic rights and freedoms in Britain. In this it combines conventional museum techniques with a range of non-traditional approaches that encourage the visitor to interact with the exhibits and thus take an active part in interpreting the 'people's history.'

Ⅲ. Moving Lives

As part of the *Migration, Work and Identity* project outlined in Section I, the People's History Museum is mounting two major exhibitions. The first, *Moving Lives*, runs from April to October 2002 and was produced with the city's Caribbean communities. The second exhibition, *Moving Stories*, will open at the end of 2002 and be produced with Manchester's South Asian communities.

Between 1945 and 1958, 125, 000 people came from the Caribbean to begin new lives Britain. As subjects of the Empire these people were British passport holders. They had learned British his-

tory in school and felt a strong connection with 'the Mother Country.'[27] After 1945, Britain faced a grave labour shortage: in the 25 years after the end of the war, unemployment never rose above 2%.[28] The British government actively encouraged immigration and recruitment campaigns were launched throughout the colonies, including the Caribbean. Many of the people drawn to Britain by the promise of work settled permanently in cities like Manchester. Today, the Black Caribbean community constitutes one of the largest ethnic minority communities in Britain accounting for almost 1% of the total UK population.[29] The exhibition poses the kinds of questions that concern all partners in the *Migration, Work and Identity* project: "After the migration, how did these people establish themselves in work and forge an identity in a new home? What were their hopes and expectations of their new lives in Britain compared with the reality of their arrival?" [30]

Moving Lives uses photographs, oral history recordings and films to give a personal view of these Caribbean communities. It also incorporates many of the regular interactive features found at the People's History Museum. Much is made of traditional Caribbean arts. To mark the opening of the exhibition there were performances by local steel bands and a Caribbean dance group. The museum hosted a series of dance workshops inviting people of all ages to come and "learn some new moves and get the chance to dance Caribbean style."[31] To coincide with the half-term school holiday, *Moving Lives* offered free workshops where children were shown how to create Caribbean carnival masks and headdresses. Actors presented dramatizations of traditional Caribbean Anansi folk tales.

A new *Living History* performance was developed for *Moving Lives*. Gabrielle Walker is a character based on the lives of three Caribbean women who traveled to Manchester in the 1950s.[32] In a dramatization entitled *No Bed Of Roses*, visitors first meet Gabrielle in the 1930s, as a schoolgirl in the Caribbean. They interact with Gabrielle and "help her to decide whether to take the plunge and move to England."[33] They meet her again as a factory worker in 1950s Manchester and are asked "has she made the right decision to travel continents?"[34] In this way the *Living History* dramatization encourages the audience to view immigration from the perspective of the migrants themselves, weighing the factors influencing the decision to travel to Britain and evaluating the conditions they continue to find when they get there.

The interactive dramatization of Gabrielle Walker's life is one way in which the museum tries to evoke empathy with the migrants' experiences. Speaking at the Manchester conference, Ratan Viswani of the UK Museum's Association suggests this as an achievable objective for the

Migration, Work and Identity project. "Migrant stories can be presented to have personal resonances for us all because everyone in ... this country is ... a member of, or involved with, some diaspora or other."[35] This is a timely reminder that given thousands of years of immigration to the British Isles, the entire population of the UK is made up of immigrants or their descendents.[36] The museum also sees the potential for encouraging vistors' empathy with migrants by having them reflect upon their own experiences of movement, upheaval and change. Two 'reminiscence sessions' will give visitors the chance to contribute their own oral histories: "Let Moving Lives inspire you to think and reminisce about your own life. Whether you have lived in Manchester from birth and have seen many changes over the years or you can remember moving here from another place, come along and share your memories with others."[37]

Ⅳ. Questions for research

I will be visiting the People's History Museum in August 2002 to view *Moving Lives* and interview some of the key people involved in its creation. These will include Sarah Gore, the Exhibitions Officer, Lizzy Hughes, the Outreach Officer and Catherine Rew, the museum's chief representative for the *Migration, Work and Identity* project. In the last section of these research notes I want to draw attention to some of the questions I will be asking about the museum and the exhibition.

Publicity for the exhibition makes it clear that a main objective is to provide a forum for members of the Caribbean community to give their own 'personal view' of their experiences as immigrants. According to the exhibition pamphlet, the topics it covers were all suggested by people interviewed by the Outreach Officer.[38] A key question, then, is who did she interview? Which groups and individuals collaborated in the creation of *Moving Lives*? How were these groups identified and what was the extent and nature of their involvement?

Speaking at the first *Migration, Work and Identity* conference, Helen Clark discussed some of these issues in connection with *The Peoples of Edinburgh* exhibition. For this exhibition, curators at the People's Story museum in Edinburgh worked with representatives of different ethnic communities in the city, after appealing by leaflet, letter and telephone for people to participate. Clark reports that when curators began discussing the *Peoples of Edinburgh* project with these groups, many members did not understand terminology such as 'reminiscence', 'oral history', 'display case' and 'text panel.' Participants were taken on museum visits to familiarize them with this "jargon" and some of the techniques of museum display.[39] In the case of *Moving Lives*,

it is important to clarify the role of the Caribbean communities in creating the exhibition. In addition to providing oral reminiscences, photographs and personal possessions, did the communities have any control over the way these things were displayed inside the museum?

A further issue raised by Helen Clark and relevant to *Moving Lives* concerns the extent to which participants' views are representative of the communities they belong to. For the *Peoples of Edinburgh* project a steering committee was set up to discuss issues and identify themes for the exhibition. Clark acknowledges that important decisions regarding what to include were strongly influenced by members who could not be said to fully 'represent' their communities. For example, the Sikh women on the committee "represented themselves and not necessarily the Sikh men, girls or boys." The curators welcomed any effort by these women to discuss the exhibition with other members of the Sikh community in Edinburgh, "but this was not expected of them, as we suspected it may lead to a difference of opinion which may be difficult to resolve."[40] Even within migrant communities, then, decisions about what to include in their 'personal stories' can be controversial. Clark reports that groups collaborating on the *Peoples of Edinburgh* project were split on the issue of whether to deal with racism in the exhibition.[41]

This leads to the related question of how *Moving Lives* connects with the broader objectives of the People's History Museum. As described earlier, in its permanent galleries the museum has what appears to be a progressive agenda. British history is presented as the "triumphs and struggles of everyday people" in securing democratic rights and freedoms.[42] Given its concern with the historical development of democratic citizenship, it would seem natural for the museum to address one of the most intractable obstacles to its realization, namely racism. Ingrained racism at all levels of British society means that non-white members of the community are routinely disadvantaged in the exercise of their democratic rights and freedoms.

A review of information available of the museum's promotional literature, however, suggests that racism is not dealt with sufficiently in its permanent collections, if at all. As a museum with its origins in the labour movement, tackling the history of race relations and racism may require a greater degree of critical self-reflection than dealing with questions of general work and welfare rights. This is because much of the racism that the first Caribbean migrants experienced in the UK was at the hands of the working classes. Many of the Caribbean migrants were prepared to work long hours and for low wages and this threatened to undermine unions' negotiating position with employers. Powerful unions such as the dockworkers and printers were able to close their industries to the new immigrants completely.[43] In its permanent collections, how

does a museum dedicated to the finest achievements of the labour movement deal with the issue of working-class racism? There is little evidence in the promotional literature that it deals with the issue at all. Do the temporary exhibitions *Moving Lives* and *Moving Stories* go any further to address this aspect of labour history?

The last sixty years have been a period of rapidly increasing ethnic and cultural diversity in Britain, and this process is accelerating. The latest national census showed that between 1991 and 2001 the ethnic minority population grew from 7% to 10%.[44] This inward migration has radically altered the public perception of what it means to be 'British.' A recent MORI survey of public attitudes to culture and identity in Britain commented that "we don't know what Britishness is."[45] From the point of view of race relations, the survey revealed many positive developments, most significantly, perhaps, that the vast majority appears to reject race and ethnicity as criteria for national citizenship. 86% of the population now disagrees that a person needs to be white in order to be "truly British."[46] On the other hand, the survey also shows that a clear majority of the population, believe new migrants have a responsibility to adapt to important aspects of British society, for example, by taking the compulsory English or 'citizenship' lessons that are currently on the government's agenda.

Historical museums have emerged as an important forum for the discussion of these issues. *Migration, Work and Identity* sees European museums collaborating in an effort to push forward discussions of national identity and the nature of citizenship in multi-ethnic communities. The way in which the People's History Museum is working with ethnic minorities to present their own stories of migration, and the manner in which it relates their experiences to the progressive struggle of ordinary people presented in its main galleries are all areas that my research aims to illuminate.

Notes

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